

Sometimes the best music happens by accident and such is the case with "Way Down Here" by songwriter/pianist David Vest. This album was recorded live at a club in Oregon with Vest backed by "The Willing Victims" a group that had never played before as a band together.

I had no idea this was the case until I went to the website of Vest's label, Trillium, and this group is so tight, you'd think they'd been playing together for years, along with that Vest wasn't even aware the show was being recorded.

That Vest is an amazing piano player is evident from the first note of the first track, "Get On Down With Me." Hard-hitting boogie-woogie and barrelhouse leaps out at you and the great blues piano masters from Chicago to New Orleans come rolling off the keys and it never stops swinging, with great harp from Paul delay, excellent guitar from Alan Hager and a terrific solo piano break from Vest. "Meet Me With Your Black Dress On" swings even harder and is one of those transcendent moments where you know the musicians are totally lost in the music creating true spontaneous magic.

Things slow down for the tough blues, "Too Old And Crazy" and this is where Vest as a songwriter comes into play. There's no doubt that Vest knows the blues, but in a way reminiscent of a certain songwriter from Minnesota, he knows how to turn what initially sounds like standard blues lines around to deliver what he wants to say instead of repeating what came out of Chicago in the '50s and '60s. This continues as they get back to swing with "What's That About," which ends with a sly reference to last presidential election. Vest and Hager toss solos to each other like basketball players with Vest's playing at the end reminiscent of Jerry Lee Lewis at his wildest.

Vest gets into a soulful groove for the gospel-flavored title track, a great song that deserves to be widely known. Again Vest's vast musical knowledge is apparent as this is the kind of song you think you've heard before, but you can't pin down exactly where.

"Heavy Weather" has a menacing feel with an ominous piano riff at the heart and some downright evil lines: "No one would ever hurt you baby/Not unless they could," and again Vest has a way of letting you know he's singing about a bit more than an approaching storm.

"Kaliyuga Highway" crosses country with Memphis Soul, while the piano echoes gospel, while Vest shows what he can do as a singer on something other than blues. And throughout this album his vocals are powerful, confident but always soulful.

Vest and friends return to rocking on “Little Effie” and “Devil Got A Hold” which Vest screams out recalling both Little Richard and Jerry Lee. As with just about all the songs on this album you know they’re having a lot of fun playing them.

New Orleans, especially Professor Longhair comes into play on “Watching You The Whole Time.” Hager plays a terrific guitar solo getting into a close to staccato picking thing that’s magically laced with a country steel sound.

The album closes with “Worried About The World” where Vest seems to wrap his primary influences, swing, gospel and blues into a Mississippi swamp romp and once again combines fairly intense lyrics with a sense of fun in a way that makes its point but hits home on all levels.

“Way Down Here” is an album that you can put on and just get into the cool blues grooves that are happening constantly. If you listen to what Vest is singing about, it goes a lot deeper. It’s as real as it gets, and if Vest and The Willing Victims had spent weeks rehearsing and doing pre-production it’s doubtful it would sound as good as this.